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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000394

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT REACTS MILDLY TO OBAMBA
CRITICISM OF PRESS FREEDOM

REF: BAKU 386

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Don Lu
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Aliyev complained of double standards on democracy and human rights, based on President Obama's recent statement on press freedom. The President joked that it was probably just copied reflexively from last year's statement and he hoped this would not continue to be emphasized in future years. The President identified security cooperation and energy as two areas for further cooperation, though emphasized Azerbaijan's independence and self-sufficiency. Azerbaijan is participating in the NATO exercises in Georgia; Armenia, because of Russia, is not. The August conflict between Russia and Georgia had caused problems for Azerbaijan, which seeks predictable, stable relations "in all directions." The President admitted that Azerbaijan has "more work to do" on democracy and human rights. Separately, the Israeli Ambassador told the Charge that President Aliyev had the previous day sharply criticized the United States in private. End Summary

¶2. (C) President Aliyev met May 12 with a visiting delegation from the Council on Foreign Relations to discuss foreign policy objectives and economic developments. The President spoke briefly to welcome the delegation, and then took questions from CFR members on a variety of subjects. The President's comments on the May 7 meeting with Armenian President Sargsyan and issues related to Turkey-Armenia reconciliation and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are reported NODIS BIRCH. This report focuses on other foreign policy issues and the President's economic agenda. Embassy notes that, hosting a large delegation and with cameras running through the entire process, President Aliyev seemed to ratchet down the tone of his comments, perhaps pulling several punches in terms of comments on neighbors and the impact of their actions on Azerbaijan's security and economy.

World Press Freedom Day Comments by Obama

¶3. (C) President Aliyev complained of U.S. double standards on democracy and human rights, based on President Obama's World Press Freedom Day statement. That statement, which

singled-out Azerbaijan (along with Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Burma and a few other countries) was met with some official criticism in Baku (ref). President Aliyev said that "Azerbaijan has been presented poorly in the international sphere," with negative views of the country prevailing. He complained of no balance in international reporting, and little fairness in the reporting of international organizations. After Armenia's March 2008 president election, he said, the international press largely ignored the ensuing violence and the deaths of 10 or more protestors.

Likewise, he lamented, the Council of Europe decided to appoint a special rapporteur on political prisoners for Azerbaijan, but had not taken the same approach to Armenia. This was done, the President said, despite the fact that "I pardoned all political prisoners in Azerbaijan." The President did not mention the fate of journalists who remain in prison. "A strong, rich Armenian lobby is working against the interests of Azerbaijan," the President concluded.

Otherwise Ready to Cooperate

¶4. (C) President Aliyev noted that, aside from the World Press Freedom Day statement, initial signs from the Obama Administration are "very encouraging." He said that he had already spoken to President Obama by telephone, and that Secretary Clinton "had called three times." President Aliyev repeated that he regretted not being able to meet President Obama last month in Istanbul, noting that other political events (i.e., disagreements with the Turkish leadership over reconciliation with Armenia) had prohibited his travel.

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Aliyev said that Azerbaijan and the United States "can do more," particularly in the areas of security cooperation and energy. At the same time, however, the President emphasized Azerbaijan's independence and self-sufficiency, and suggested that Azerbaijan would not rush to compromise national interests.

NATO: Azerbaijan Yes, Armenia No

¶5. (C) Azerbaijan is ready to move forward on cooperation with NATO, the President said. NATO, on the other hand, must be ready to receive Azerbaijan. Aliyev noted that he had recently visited Brussels and met with NATO leadership, as well as the North Atlantic Council. He emphasized that Azerbaijan is participating in the current NATO exercise in Georgia, while Armenia is not. Yerevan had offered many excuses on its reason to withdraw from the exercise, but couldn't come up with a common line. Every minister is saying something different, Aliyev said. "But we all know the real reason that Armenia is not participating," the President said, alluding to Russian influence over Yerevan.

Russia-Georgia Still a Sore Point

¶6. (C) Responding to a question about the impact of the August 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict on Azerbaijan, Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan shares borders with both countries and therefore must maintain good relations "in all directions." The events of August had been highly unfortunately for Azerbaijan, threatening the country's east-west trade route. We understand, the President said, that "warring neighbors" can only be bad for Azerbaijan. He emphasized that Azerbaijan was conducting its foreign policy based on our national interests and responsible approaches to pragmatic realities and international law.

Kosovo a Bad Precedent

¶7. (C) President Aliyev suggested that the international community, namely the West, had erred in recognizing Kosovo,

as it "set a precedent" for Russian recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. "Setting these sorts of precedents are very bad," the President said, noting that the result has been greater instability in the Caucasus. Indirectly referring to the impact of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia on Nagorno-Karabakh and the overall conflict with Armenia, the President said that "these actions must be decided according to international law."

Iran: Predictable, Stable Relations

¶8. (C) President Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan has "predictable, stable relations" with Iran, based on "mutual respect and non-interference." Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan and Iran have much in common, as three times as many ethnic Azeris live in Northeastern Iran. Perhaps because of the presence of cameras, he did not comment on the Caspian Sea delimitation dispute or Iran's claims on the Alov offshore field. In response to a question on his view of having a second nuclear power on his border, he said that we should, &respect differences of lifestyle and choices,8 and said it would be &okay8 for Iran to be a nuclear power, echoing his &non-interference8 posture.

Democracy and Human Rights: More Work to Do

¶9. (C) Responding to a question on the role of civil society, President Aliyev said that further development is necessary. He acknowledged that, following the war with Armenia in the 1990s, Azerbaijan had prioritized "stability, security and strengthening of the military." At the same time, he said that "we have chosen a democratic future." The President

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said that Azerbaijan must allow civil society to develop, and that Azerbaijan as a whole must abide by rule of law and promote democratic development. "There is much work to be done," the President said.

Aliyev Bashes U.S. to the Israelis

¶10. (C) In a separate meeting on May 11, Israeli Ambassador Arthur Lenk told the Embassy that President Aliyev had complained bitterly about the United States. The President recounted all of things Azerbaijan does for the U.S. (Coalition contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan, participation in a NATO exercise in Georgia, and the recent joint U.S.-Azerbaijan military exercise). By contrast, according to Aliyev, the U.S. has done nothing for Azerbaijan. Instead, he argued that the U.S. is funding NGOs that work to bring down his government. Moreover, the U.S. demands to re-open radio stations in Azerbaijan that seek to remove his government from power. He said that he was disappointed with the U.S. as a partner.

¶11. (C) On the other hand, Lenk said President Aliyev was reasonably positive about President Obama. He noted the long and constructive phone call from President Obama. He explained Obama's use of the Armenia term for "genocide" in his genocide remembrance day remarks as being necessary to fulfill his obligation to Armenian-Americans. He described Obama as a reasonable and honorable man who listens instead of lectures. (Note: Lenk is a U.S.-born Israeli and therefore President Aliyev's comments were likely meant to be reflected back to the U.S.)

Comment: President Downplays Obama World Press Day Statement

¶10. (C) CFR members were clearly impressed with President Aliyev. The fact that the President was willing to meet with them for over an hour) on the same day that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan was arriving in Baku) was well noted, as

was his willingness to take questions from the delegation on a wide variety of topics. Several members noted that they were surprised that the President or his team had not requested topics or specific questions in advance, and were astonished to see him answer the questions without notes or consultations with staff. The President's command of English was also impressive. President Aliyev obviously tempered his comments on President Obama's World Press Freedom Day statement, joking at one point that perhaps the President's staff had merely recycled the language from President Bush's statement last year. Clearly he was disappointed with the specific mention of Azerbaijan, but it does not appear to be an issue that will resonate here.

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